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Sermon delivered by

C.O. BENGTSON

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

"Now as they went on their way, he entered a village; and a woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve along? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her'." (Luke 10:38-42)

"One thing is needful."

Martha didn't see it that way. She felt that many things needed to be done if a dinner worthy of her high guest was to be made ready. So she was anxious and troubled, and it was just too provoking that Mary should choose this moment to sit at the feet of Jesus. Can't you just see Martha, her face flushed from the heat of the kitchen and beads of sweat on her forehead?

I think we all sympathize with Martha. And what is more, perhaps some of us secretly agree with her. "One thing is needful"? No, that would make life too simple to be realistic.

One is tempted to ask, "Has not Jesus here contradicted himself?" At another time he said, "Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things." What things? Why, food and drink and clothing. And He has taught us to pray: "Give us this day our daily bread." There is a wide sweep to that petition. We are taught that it includes "everything that is required to satisfy our daily needs." In other words, it includes everything that belongs to a normal human life, everything that tends to make life comfortable and useful.

But of course Jesus did'nt contradict himself. He just put first things first. "But seek first His Kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well." "All these things" belong to a normal human life. But, the promise that we shall have them is conditional. The granting or withholding of them is the prerogative of God's benevolent providence, which always seeks our highest good. There are times of distress and sickness and trouble and sorrow for God's children. "All these things" may then seem of little importance. A certain rich man could buy every-

thing that he desired, except health. He suffered from an incurable disease. "All these things" did'nt matter very much to him.

Martha was troubled about many things. Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to His teaching. His words are the words of eternal life. He Himself is the Word that in the beginning was with God, the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. As Mary sat at His feet she beheld His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. She saw revealed in His kind personality the personality of God. And there came into her soul the calm and the sense of security which belongs to a child of God who feels himself safe in the Heavenly Father's tender keeping.

The story of Martha and Mary has sometimes been misunderstood and misrepresented. Jesus did'nt find fault with Martha because she served. He found fault with her because in her service she was distracted by so many unnecessary things. She had lost, at least for the moment, the right perspective of life, and in consequence she became tense and irritable and cross. Just a few moments with Mary at the feet of Jesus would have given her a true perspective and restored her calm. She would then have made her service acceptable to the Lord.

"Mary has chosen the good portion." She chose a dish that was better than any dish the best cooking of Martha could ever prepare. She chose food that came down from heaven, food for the soul. So many people feed their bodies, but starve their souls.

At this service you and I are invited to the Holy Supper of our Lord Jesus Christ. Here is indeed food for the soul. This food has been prepared by the Lord Himself. We are invited to His Table. The Lord knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust, that we are of the earth, earthly. And so He comes to us by earthly means. There are things here to see and touch and taste. We enact a holy drama. The bread is a fitting symbol of Christ's broken body, the wine of the blood He shed on the cross.

But also, here is the living Word, who came down from heaven to dwell among us. Here is "the true Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, given unto us Christians to eat and to drink."

Here it is not only fitting and proper, but it is necessary, that we should leave Martha's worries behind us and come to the Lord's Table in the spirit of Mary.

Martha is not the only Christian to lose her temper. Even as we rightly contend for the Church and our holy religion it lies near at hand for Christians to become wrought up, fault-finding, and to pass harsh judgment on one another. St. Paul found it necessary to admonish the Ephesians, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." That admonition we too must take to heart. And where we have failed we must repent, for has not Jesus said,"If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your father forgive your trespasses"?

One more word about Martha. She heeded the gentle rebuke of Jesus, and that bore good fruit in her life. One day Jesus met her at the grave of her brother Lazarus. She was content then to fall at the Master's feet.

That day she heard wonderful words from His lips. and she replied to Him with a beautiful confession of faith. "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me though he die yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?' She said to Him, 'Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world'." Martha's Christ is with us in the Holy Supper, and if we truly believe in Him He will raise us up from sin and death, and will give us life in Himself for time and eternity.

I have said that Jesus did'nt find fault with Martha because she served. We read that six days before the passover Jesus came to Bethany. Again they made Him a supper, and again Martha served. There was no rebuke now, and one senses the deep spirit of understanding between Jesus and his servant Martha. God delights in the loving service of His children. We learn in our catechism that we are saved to serve. "I believe that Jesus Christ... has redeemed me... in order that I might be His own, live under Him in His Kingdom, and serve Him."

Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and heard the words of life. Having received this good portion from the Lord she too in due time rose up to serve. "Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment." And this service pleased the Master, and He praised it.

Today we come to the altar and the gifts we receive are wondrous fair; they are beyond our telling. We come, we eat and drink and strengthened by this holy repast we go forth to serve. May we so receive, and so serve, that we at last may hear the blessed words, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord." AMEN.

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